Ground Water Quality Issues

Major sources of contamination of ground water resources in Colorado include return flows from agricultural use, illicit dumping, and septic tanks. Other significant sources are municipal waste discharges, inadequate facilities for toxic waste disposal, and mining activities. Minor sources are sanitary landfills and leaking underground storage tanks.

Other new problems are developing within the state and are being handled on a daily basis, such as backflow of agrichemicals down water wells, contamination from exploratory wells from drilling activities, land application of treated waste water, and industrial impoundments with a discrete discharge point to surface waters.

Ground Water Management and Protection

Ground water rights administration was first legislated in 1957. The major ground water legislation came in 1965 with the Ground Water Management Act. This legislation allowed designation of basins and formation of ground water management districts. A1969 amendment required augmentation for certain ground water rights.

In 1981, the governor of Colorado gave the Colorado Department of Health (CDH) a charge to review all the environmental laws of the state to see how they protected ground water and to coordinate 14 agencies in the state to develop a ground water protection plan. The CDH developed the protection plan and had all 14 agencies sign a memorandum of agreement in 1985. The agreement states that the agencies will enforce their laws and that if they encounter ground water problems or pollution activities they will use the ground water strategy developed by the CDH.

The CDH strategy includes a classification system that is similar to Florida's system. The initial classification is based on beneficial uses; the second part includes numeric standards; then a screening mechanism is employed for site-specific areas (hydrogeologic studies); and the next step is to write specific control regulations for activities that are not regulated for ground water impacts. The CDH also has an advisory committee that includes representation from the Colorado Association of Commerce and Industry, the League of Women Voters, and the Bar Association.